Are we at the end of ethnicity?

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Are We at the End of Ethnicity?

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It is the fate of political scientists to work with concepts that are considered to be "common sense". But in reality things are far from being that simple or clear. Oftentimes issues of power, authority, rights, ideology are taken for granted, without going more in-depth into the origin of the concept or into the manner it could be related to political and social reality. Ethnicity is one of the leading figures of this apparently easy-to-use concepts. However, ethnicity is one of the most complex and elusive terms to define. A clear definition would also presume a certain time of measurement, even is we are only to speak about a qualitative one. But how can one work with notion such as "ethnicity" which is, at the end of the day, a social construct with deep cultural and psychological roots based on linguistic, racial, regional, or religious backgrounds, as we could clearly see from the definitions provided by Weber. Ethnicity provides an affective sense of belonging and is socially defined in terms of their meaning for its actors. The problem has been tackled by scholars who dedicated most of their academic work to the study of political representation, including the one of ethnic groups, such as Norris, who stresses:

> "Ethnicity is a particularly difficult concept to operationalize and measure, and single-dimension indicators based on the number and size of ethnic groups in different countries are unsatisfactory unless we can also gauge the geographic distribution and degree of politicization of these groups"[1].

Ethnicity

Although nowadays taken for granted, the term "ethnicity" was mentioned for the first time by Max Weber. But the term was presented as a dictionary entry less that half a decade ago. To be more precise, the concept was to be explained in the 1972 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, a fact that made some social scientists to joke about it, in the sense that ethnicity could be considered a new term[2]. It is derived, as many social science concepts do, from Greek, from word *ethnos*, with the initial sense of heathen or pagan. It is in this sense that it has been adopted by the English language during the Middle Ages, to be changed in the sense of *racial* only in the second half of the 19th century. In the colloquial language we still think of minority issues when the word "ethnicity" is at stake, although few people seem to remember that ethnicity also implies the majorities. Nevertheless, with the brilliant exception of Weber, not much attention has been paid to this concept until the post World War II era.

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[1] Pippa NORRIS, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behaviour*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 227.

[2] Thomas H. ERIKSEN, "Concepts of Ethnicity", in John HUTCHINSON, Anthony D. SMITH (eds.), *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, 1996, p. 28.

Who or what stands at the core of nations? According to the classical approach of Max Weber[1], ethnic communities are the very soul of nations. Nevertheless, stresses the author, who was one of the first social scientists to place ethnicity in a historical and economic context, it is not mandatory for the ethnic communities to be characterized by a territorial homeland, a common public culture, economic unity, common legal codes, rights and duties for all. Then what is left of ethnicity? Commenting on the importance of political action for ethnic formation and persistence, Weber is arguing that "it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity"[2]. The remark is even more important as it brings into discussion the political context and the endurance of ethnicity under the circumstances of an organized political behaviour.

Moreover, he also relates ethnicity with religion, although he stresses that this is an extremely problematic and uncertain relationship:

> "As for organized religion, its role is both spiritual and social. The myth of common ethnic origins is often intertwined with creation myths […] or at least presupposes them […] The liturgy and rites of the Church or community of the faithful supply the texts, prayers, chants, feasts, ceremonies and customs, sometimes even the scripts of distinctive ethnic communities, setting them apart from neighbours"[3].

The border is an extremely thin one, but the history of Central and Eastern Europe proved Weber to be right – oftentimes the ethnic cleavages are enriched by the religious ones, although for a less attentive observer this situation might not be that obvious. However, it is enough to mention that religious denominations were used by representatives and leaders of ethnic groups, both majority and minority ones, as a landmark for stressing the importance of being granted political, economic and cultural rights.

Ethnicity might also be a defining criterion in relation with ethnic identity and citizenship rights, it can lay at the very basis of political entities such as regions and states and it could also be a source of ethnic mass mobilization. Oftentimes ethnicity is linked with the issue of territory, in the sense that it could bring about important aspects of the nature and level of territorial claims made by certain ethnic groups. It could also be linked to political power, since and ethnic group, once aware of its uniqueness, it starts wanting preserving it and, oftentimes, this can be done only within the framework offered by a better hold of political power. This wish of an ethnic group to obtain political power is usually defined by students of ethnicity as "nationalism". Smith defines it as "an ideological movement aiming to attain or maintain autonomy, unity or identity for a social group which is deemed to constitute a nation"[4].

Another important aspect of ethnicity is stressed by Lijphart[5], who remarks that one should not overstate the importance granted to ethnicity, in the sense that

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[1] Max WEBER, *Economy and Society*, vol. I, part 1, ch. 5 ("Ethnic Groups"), G. Roth & C. Wittich eds. and translators, Bedminster Press, New York, 1968.

[2] The remark is also used by Smith in his seminal work regarding ethnic identity (Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991, note 19, p. 13).

[3] Max WEBER, *Economy and Society*, cit, pp. 27-28, 50-51.

[4] Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, cit., p. 51.

[5] Arend LIJPHART, "Powersharing, Ethnic Agnosticism, and Political Pragmatism", *Transformation*, no. 21, 1993, p. 95.

in between the primordial assumption that ethnicity is a "given" on one hand and the instrumental assumption that ethnicity is "made" by the politicians, the researcher should maintain the middle road.

On the other hand, it is also true that ethnicity has been one of the important currencies of politics during the last century, as Fenton[1], who rightly remarks, drawing on Smith's[2] observation regarding the importance of ethnicity as related to the nation-state, the last one being *the* organizing principle:

> "This is so for two reasons, each closely related to the other. The first is that the framing of the state as the political organ of a nation, *ipso facto,* opens up the possibility of minoritized ethnicities. The second is that, to a greater or less degree, modern states continue to give expression to the idea of the nation as an ancestral formation, despite the very considerable pressures to abandon this mode of the representation of 'peoplehood'. These ethnicizations are, however, to a very large degree, contingent[3]".

Ethnicity is the attribute to whom everybody turns: being elusive and highly emotional, it is also easier to operate with, since we fear what we actually do not know[4]. And we shall always favour those whom we know better, those whom we can more easily identify; if individuals are faced with alternative beliefs and values, this process might prove to be stressfull.

> "It cannot be expected that members of an ethnic group with its own indigenous psychology and everyday ideology should be able to relinquish their evaluative dimensions of identity in favour of an alternative-set. Therefore, it is apparent that in general members of one ethnic group, who adhere to one world-view, will continue to evaluate themselves favourably and others of another ethnicity, who believe differently, unfavourably. To be sure, there will be individuals who are able to subscribe to superordinate beliefs by means of which they are able to evaluate people of different ethnicities as being worthy of merit"[5].

The definition of ethnicity is similar to that of the related concept of "nationalism": it is generally defined in terms of a set of criteria, such as the ones previously mentioned: a common religion, common ancestry, shared cultural values, common history, a certain type of "we-ness". However, according to Keating[6], ethnicity and nationalism are not the same thing, since "most ethnic groups do not identify themselves as nations or make claims for territorial self-government.

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[1] Steve FENTON, "Beyond Ethnicity: The Global Comparative Analysis of Ethnic Conflict", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 45, no. 3-4, 2004, p. 189.

[2] Antony D. SMITH, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.

[3] Steve FENTON, "Beyond Ethnicity…cit.", p. 189.

[4] Research undertook in many environments have proven that actually those individuals belonging to different ethnic or racial groups, but living together in the same communities, have more positive perceptions and attitudes towards each other than those people who live in mono-ethnic communities and who show a higher degree of rejection to anyone who is considered to be "different".

[5] Peter WEINRICH, "Ethnic Identities and Indigenous Psychologies in Pluralist Societies", *Psychology Developing Societies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1991, p. 82.

[6] Michael KEATING, *Plurinational Democracy. Stateless Nations in a Post-Soveregnity Era*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2001, p. 5.

Most nations, in turn, comprise several different ethnic groups". Therefore, the turmoiled history of Central and Eastern Europe led to the situation in which ethnic groups' claims are more than often overlapping with claims of autonomy and self-determination, if we are only to speak about the "soft" demands put forward by the representatives of ethnic minorities in this region. Nevertheless, Keating argues that ethnic politics can take three various shapes: the integrative, the particularist, and the disintegrative one. The integrative form involves excluded ethnic groups that make claims based upon common citizenship. The particularist form is represented by those groups who claim a distinct kind of treatment, based on their shared characteristics. Actually, this is the very basis of what goes on in the present day ethnic and identity politics. The last type of mode, the disintegrative one, engages groups that make claims for self-determination. What Keating is actually saying here is that even if there is a connection between ethnicity and nationalism the relationship is necessary but not sufficient. It is the relationship that applies only to one type of ethnic politics and one form of nation-building[1].

The question that arises is if the representations are fixed. Or, in social psychological terms, can individuals "play" with the labels that are applied to them? This would mean that not only the representation regarding the individuals, but also the ones of the groups are subject to permanent change, that the members of the ethnic groups are re-inventing and constantly re-creating the meanings that they are associated with. From this point of view, one could speak about, in the line of Berger and Luckmann[2], about the "social construction of the ethnic identity" or even about a "political construction of ethnicity" in the case when the identities are taken in the field of political negotiations. These negotiations enable the members of ethnic groups to decide, according to the situation that they have to deal with, which identity to present as being more salient. An illustrative example in this regard is the different type of discourses adopted by ethnic party representatives depending on their target-audience – oftentimes, the central point in the discourse shifts when the own rank and file or the majority are respectively addressed.

The relationship is an exclusionary one, since, Cento Bull shows, a collective identity that has been built around ethnicity emphasizes in fact the cultural differences and exclusion of the groups:

> "In terms of content, therefore, it contrasts sharply with a collective identity based, say, on class, which is inclusive and universalist because its main criteria for belonging is through acquired social status, or ideology, which is also inclusive because one only needs to subscribe to it to feel that one belongs"[3].

Scholars of ethnicity have observed during the last decade that ethnicity seems to have a much higher profile and to be more prominent than other collective identities in contemporary societies[4]. Some of the causes identified for this trend are political instability and post-communist transition, in the context of

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[1] Michael KEATING, *Plurinational Democracy*...cit., p. 5.

[2] Peter L. BERGER, Thomas LUCKMANN, Peter L. BERGER, Thomas LUCKMANN, *Construcția socială a realității*, Rom. transl. A. Butucelea, Editura Univers, București, 1999.

[3] CENTO BULL, "Collective Identities: From politics of Inclusion to the Politics of Ethnicity and Difference", *The Global Review of Ethnic Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3-4, March/June 2003, pp. 42-43.

[4] Karl CORDELL, "Introduction: Aims and Objectives", in IDEM (ed.), *Ethnicity and Democratisation in the New Europe*, Routledge, London & New York, 1999, pp. 3-10.

regime change after 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe[1], a decreased trust in the capacity of the state that came together with the political and economic transformations brought about by the transition to democracy, by globalization and by the European integration process, that proved to be painful experiences for many of the former citizens of the communist bloc. Ethnic identity proved to be an important denominator under these circumstances; moreover, it is not only the Eastern part of Europe that is striving with the issue of identity – the Western states are also subjects of (re)construction(s) of identities under the continuous social changes that occur due to migration and also to political and economic developments.

Ethnic Identity

The question of the link between identity on one hand and state power on the other has been one of the most important dilemmas since the 18th century. According to Schöpflin[2], identities are created at two levels: an institutional one and a symbolic one, the two functioning reciprocally:

> "An institution creates its symbolic dimensions and is reproduced in part by reference to those symbols. Thus the use of symbols – flags, monuments, ceremonies and so on – is not a superfluous extravagance, a throw-back to pre-rational age, but a central component of identity creation and maintenance"[3].

It is the very nature of human beings grouped together in collectivities to form an identity. However, the process of this formation is not a simple one, identities being structured by a web of factors at the two different levels. Schöpflin identifies four processes of identity formation: 1) the identities structured by the state: 2) the identities shaped by the civil society; 3) the identities shaped by ethnicity; 4) the identities shaped by the international dimension. The ethnic identity does not pop up from the middle of nowhere – it is shaped by all the others: the state, the civil society, the international realm. In return, the ethnic identity intervenes in the shape and structure of the other factors.

One consequence of the identities being socially constructed is that the criteria that are used to distinguish between different ethnic identities, and the political salience of ethnic cleavages, fluctuate, sometimes even radically, from one society to another[4]. This state of affairs raise a high obstacle in front of one's attempts to run a comparative analysis, since a researcher has to be aware of to the specific conditions in each society, for example, the role of race and ethnicity in a

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[1] P. PAYTON, "Ethnicity in Western Europe Today", in Karl CORDELL (ed.), *Ethnicity*...cit., pp. 24-36; John ISHIYAMA, Marijike BREUNNING, *Ethnopolitics in the New Europe*, CEVIPOL (Centre d'étude de la vie politique de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles), CO Lynne Rienner, London, 1998; Adam MICHNIK, "Dignity and Fear: A Letter to a Friend", in R. CAPLAN, J. FEFFER (eds.), *Europe's New Nationalism. States and Minorities in Conflict*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, 1996, pp. 15-22.

[2] George SCHÖPFLIN , "Reason, Identity and Power", in IDEM (ed.), *Nations. Identity. Power. The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst Company, London, 2000, p. 29.

[3] George SCHÖPFLIN, "Reason…cit.", p. 29.

[4] Pippa NORRIS, *Electoral Engineering*…cit, p. 315.

country like Canada, regional political arrangements in countries like Belgium, Italy or Spain, or the critical importance of religion in the states of the Middle East. The relevant cleavages based on divisions of ethnic identity, race, language, region, or religion vary in all these countries, making comparisons quiet difficult.

Things become even more complicated if we keep in mind that, exactly because socially constructed, identities are multiple. Each human being is the bearer of several identities, that he or she puts forward depending on the circumstances they are placed in:

> "*Ethnic identity* refers to nominal membership in an ascriptive category, including race, language, caste, or religion. This is consistent with the broad definition now taken as standard in the field of ethnic mobilization: Ethnicity easily embraces groups differentiated by colour, language, and religion; it covers 'tribes', 'races', 'nationalities', and 'castes'"[1].

The only type of measurement a researcher might perform in such a situation is a nominal one. However, the fact that membership in an ethnic category is inherited leaves ground for definitions such as Asian American Muslim, Canadian Asian Christian, African American from London, Bosniak (to be Muslim Serbian) from Sarajevo, Hungarian Jew from Romania, Pomak (Bulgarian Muslim) from Sofia, etc. All these examples illustrate that we are usually born as members of several ethnic, linguistic or religious categories, with a more or less reduced choice regarding the "strongest" identity.

The definition of ethnic identity is dependent not only on the practical context but also upon the theoretical one:

> "Theoretical approaches to ethnic identity suggest a progression of identity starting in (early) adolescence with a diffused or naive state of awareness, leading perhaps to an exploration of the meaning of ethnic identity and its relation to others and ultimately moving to a comprehensive and secure sense of self in relation to ethnicity. Because of the complexity of meaning of facets of ethnic identity, the operationalization of ethnic-identity-related constructs becomes difficult, and the measurement of the constructs at times does not parallel theoretical interpretations"[2].

Identity is also about language, national membership and state structure. Chandra and Laitin[3] observe that both Gellner and Anderson[4] maintain separate

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[1] Kanchan CHANDRA, *Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability*, PPS3(2) 05018 1/18 04/29/05, http://politics.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/4737/chandra_f04.pdf (accessed on 30.05.2006).

[2] Phillip O. PEGG, Laura E. PLYBON, "Toward the Theoretical Measurement of Ethnic Identity", *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 250-264/pp. 251-252. The authors quote F.E. ABOUD, "The Development of Ethnic Self-identification and Attitudes", in J.S. PHINNEY, M.J. ROTHERHAM (eds.), *Children's Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism and Development*, CA: Sage, Beverly Hills, 1987, pp. 33-52; J.S. PHINNEY, *The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure: A New Scale for Use with Diverse Groups*, No. 7, pp. 156-176, 1992; H. TAJFEL, "Intergroup Behaviour", in H. TAJFEL, C. FRASER (eds.), *Introductory Social Psychology: An Analysis of Individual Reaction and Response*, Penguin, Middlesex (UK), 1978, pp. 423-445.

[3] Kanchan CHANDRA, David LAITIN, *A Framework for Thinking About Identity Change*, LICEP5/May 11 2002, http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/ocvprogram/licep/5/chandra-laitin/chandra-laitin.pdf, (accessed/downloaded on 29.05.2006).

[4] Ernest GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism,* Blackwell, Oxford, 1994; Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London & New York, 1990.

on the whole of their theories these three aspects of identity change. They both see the "nation" as the main identity dimension of the modern, industrial era.

Linked to the national membership, there is also a political dimension of ethnic identity. According to Birnir[1], "ethnic identities serve as a stable but flexible information shortcut for political choices", a fact that influences the ethnic party formation and creates the expectation to vote in a higher number for the party that represents better their interests. The attempt to access the government coalitions in order to represent their interests (that would mean bargaining over office-related policies, goods and other benefits) leads to the stabilization of the democratic regime. Birnir rightly observes the fact that the ethnic identity presumes a differentiation between groups; the more salient, the higher the order and meaning and that "ethnic socialization fosters individual loyalty to the ethnic group"[2]. A good example in this regard is the communist state, that, although it managed to neutralize civil society almost to making it completely harmless, at least for a couple of decades, it has been not that successful when it tried to diminish the effects of ethnic identities, in spite of its attempts of counting and controlling ethnic minorities. It is absolutely true that the modern state has oftentimes the capacity to protect and even promote ethnic identity. The problem arises when the bearers of different ethnic identities promote separate cultural reproduction, translated into practice into a conflict between ethnic groups. This does not mean that the conflict is necessarily violent, since it can be resolved through negotiation, in the political arena, but symbolic conflicts linger and the legitimacy of the state is challenged on a continuous basis by various ethnic groups.

Ethnic Group

One could define an ethnic group as "a group with common cultural traditions and a sense of identity which exists as a subgroup of a larger society"[3]. But this definition, as Walker Connor[4] shows, is the one usually given by the American sociologists and it makes the ethnic group synonymous with minority. It is true it has been used in reference to almost all minority, religious, linguistic minorities, but it is far from being a comprehensive definition.

Ethnic groups are most of the time informal, they do not belong or interfere with the political or economic milieu[5]. When they do, i.e., when they are organized per se by the state, they cease to belong to the territory of "ethnicity", moving towards the field of national or international politics. These are the groups that use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena[6].

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[1] Johanna Kristin BIRNIR, *Ethnicity and Electoral Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 2007.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 27.

[3] Definitions according to George and Achille THEODORSON, *A Modern Dictionary of Sociology*, Barnes & Noble Books, New York, 1969, p. 135, or H.S. MORRIS, "Ethnic Groups", in *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, MacMillan, New York, 1968, pp. 167-172.

[4] Walker CONNOR, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1999, p. 101.

[5] Abner COHEN, *Custom and Politics in Africa*, quoted in John HUTCHINSON, Anthony D. SMITH (eds.), *Ethnicity*, cit., p. 84.

[6] Paul BRASS, *Ethnic Group and Ethnic Identity Formation*, Croom Helm, London, 1985, pp. 86-87.

Different branches of social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science, international relations) have come up with different approaches, from stating what a group is to explaining what a group is not. There are several perspectives of analysis of the ethnic groups. What is important is the fact that none of the approaches can be found in a pure form, most of the research and comments regarding ethnicity used a mixed approach. However, the most prominent ideal types of analysis are:

– *transactionalist* – that presumes that transactions across the borders between groups actually strengthen the boundaries, ethnic groups are considered to be fixed, ascriptive, making use of cultural and linguistic symbols[1];

– *instrumentalist* – according to which ethnic boundaries are not fixed; ethnicity is a political response of competing ethnic groups for resources, that leads to the manipulation of symbols by the elites[2];

– *primordialist* – presumes that religion, language, race, ethnicity, customs are cultural givens[3]. From this point of view, other authors also define an ethnic group as a collectivity within a larger society, that has a supposedly common ancestry, memories and a common cultural focus such as language, religion, kinship, or physical appearance[4];

– *rational choice* – over here group solidarity and identity choice are a result of the individual quest for public goods[5]; in this context, ethnic parties play a key roe in monitoring and controlling information regarding their members, who came together only as long as they have foreseen certain benefits. From this point of view, ethnicity is just a pass for membership into a coalition and an information source regarding about the political coalitions and groups to which other individuals belong to (although, on the other hand, this is a purely instrumental view admits the author).

Most examples of politicised ethnic identities are in fact combination of "primordialist" ascripitive associations, "instrumentalist" and less rational adaptations with more rational ones. Reilly[6] notes that the instrumentalist approach is "often harassed by unscrupulous would-be ethnic leaders or 'ethnic entrepreneurs' who mobilize supporters on the basis of crude but often effective ethnic appeals". This kind of mobilization might lead to a diverse ethnic society, in which ethnicity is actually one of the most important cross-cutting political cleavage, a "divided society" in which interests are organized, at the end of the day, for political aims, such as elections. The problem with the primordialist view, based on shared beliefs, customs and traditions face the problem of excluding large number of individuals who fit some of the traits; the best examples in this regard are Jews and Armenians,

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[1] Frederik BARTH, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries", in John HUTCHINSON, Anthony D. SMITH (eds.), *Ethnicity*, cit., pp. 11-37.

[2] Abner COHEN, *Custom and Politics in Africa*, cit.

[3] Clifford GEERTZ, "Primordial Ties", in *Ibidem*; Joseph ROTSCHILD, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981.

[4] From Martin BULMER, "Race and Ethnicity", in Robert G. BURGESS (ed.), *Key Variables in Social Investigation*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1986, p. 54.

[5] Michael HECHTER, "Ethnicity and Rational Choice Theory", in John HUTCHINSON, Anthony D. SMITH (eds.), *Ethnicity*, cit. pp. 90-98; Daniel N. POSNER, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 2005, pp. 7, 12.

[6] Benjamin REILLY, *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 4.

who speak a variety of languages or dialects, who might practice or not the same religions (Jews are not necessarily subjects of the Mosaic rite, Armenians might be Orthodox or Catholics) and who come from so many different parts of the world that it is impossible to speak of a common culture and, nevertheless, they are defined as and "ethnic group". A possible solution is given by Fearon and Laitin[1], who suggest that it might be useful to make a distinction between two qualities that help defining and differentiate social categories like ethnicity: on one hand we have the *membership rules*, which are the embedded or unequivocal rules that one uses in deciding who counts as a member of an ethnic group, and the *content* of a social category, i.e. the qualities, attributes, or obligations typically associated with members of a category. In other words, belonging to an ethnic group is also a matter of convention and negotiation, without implying though that conventions are arbitrarily made. The example that the two authors give is the one of "being an Armenian" – by just adopting a certain type of life-style and mannerism, by converting to the Armenian Gregorian religion, one does not become automatically and Armenian and he or she will not be perceived as such by the others either. What they will need would also be a natural common history, recognized as such by the rest of the group, i.e. to comply with the internal logic of group construction and its descendency.

Research undertook by students of ethnicity has proved that, in spite of the attempts of different political systems, the group loyalties are extremely high. Among these, the loyalty towards the ethnic group stands the highest, in spite of the attempts and claims that class or political difference might overshadow what many like to speak to about but much fewer analyse more in-depth, i.e. ethnicity. The analyses performed by researchers such as Birnir or Chandra[2] has proven that the ethnic identity, as one of the many identities that individuals bear throughout their lives, is one of the most powerful ones.

The constructivist findings regarding the ethnic groups are placed in a dichotomy with the primordialist ones. The later are also characterized by two main pre-suppositions as they have been put forward by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz[3]: the first one is that individuals have a single ethnic identity and second, that this identity is fixed in the present and future. For him, this identity has been assumed sometime in the past, whereas Chandra remarks, it has been initially constructed through human intervention and it might be the result of past conflicts and hatreds, inherited from centuries of common history. Why is the primordialist view nevertheless important? Because it enables researchers to work with the ethnic identity as an immutable phenomenon and consider the ethnic groups as exogenous variables that can be linked eventually to political, social, and economic ones.

Returning to the constructivist view, students of ethnicity base their inquiries on two different presuppositions, i.e. that individuals have multiple and not singular identities and that these identities might vary according to different causal variables. This causal relationship presumes that ethnic groups change when identities

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[1] James D. FEARON, David D. LAITIN, *Ordinary Language and External Validity: Specifying Concepts in the Study of Ethnicity*, paper discussed at the LiCEP meetings October 20-22, 2000, at the University of Pennsylvania, p. 9.

[2] Johanna Kristin BIRNIR, *Ethnicity*...cit.; Kanchan CHANDRA, *Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics*, APSA-CP Winter 2001 Symposium.

[3] Clifford GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 2000.

change through processes of modernization, or through the relationship with different institutions, or as a response to individual needs in order to obtain desired resources that otherwise belong to the state.

The observation is even more important in the context in which it is much more difficult for the majority groups to organize around a common aim, or a common target. Usually, in the case of the Central and Eastern European countries, this aim is represented by what might be defined as "the national state", a modern concept that has been forged in the 19th century but started to be used per se by the newly formed democratic states in the first half of the 20th century.

As for the rational choice approach into the field of ethnic groups, several authors are sceptical and sometimes even critical regarding the theory's usefulness on this subject[1]. However, the force of an ethnic group might be measured through how much it demands and it gets from its government. It is not the story of "passive socialization" but the one of "strategic investments"[2]. Ethnic groups act as strategic actors in the reciprocal relationships, but also in relation with the state – be it the host-state or the kin-state, across the border. If these actors know each other in terms of preferences, capabilities and beliefs, then the other's response might be anticipated[3]. What do ethnic groups bargain for[4]? Subsidies in the field of culture and education, a higher cultural autonomy, regional or political autonomy, a higher and better quality political representation. It is also true that this equation might pass to higher level by the possible existence of a third party that might intervene – over here the examples are numerous – from kin-states across the border to international organizations and institutions such as the European Union or OSCE. Nevertheless, the relationship is not necessarily burdened by this, oftentimes all parties involved are in a winning position, or, to put it in other words, what they lose does not exceed what they win.

Nations, Nationalism(s) and Ethnic Groups

The question of ethnic groups brings us back to another well-known debate: what sort of human community can be considered a *"people"* or a *"nation"*? Which is the determinant factor? Sharing a territory, a common historical fate, a common language, a religious community? We shall not probably have a univocal answer to this question, as well as to the question regarding a definition of a community named "nation" or an "ethnic group" (as we could see, any student of national issues knows that the recognised human communities cannot be as birds of a feather: as many nations, as many definitions). However, we do have several reference points of the definition.

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[1] Rupen CENTYIAN, "Ethnic Bargaining in the Shadow of Third-Party Intervention", *International Organization*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 2002, p. 646, *apud*. Stephen M. WALT, "Rigor or Rigor Mortis. Rational Choice and Security Studies", *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 5-48; Miles KAHLER, "Rationality in International Relations", *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1998, pp. 919-941.

[2] Daniel N. POSNER, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics*...cit, p. 24.

[3] Rupen CENTYIAN, "Ethnic Bargaining…cit.", p. 647.

[4] It should be understood here that most of the bargaining that takes place actually occurs between ethnic groups on one hand and the depositary of the resources on the other, i.e. the state.

Pierre Kende[1] speaks of two main features of a "people" or "nation". The first feature is a political one. Kende considers that we can speak of an independent people only in the case of a human community that has reached a certain level of political organisation and self-consciousness – with its collective individuality and uniqueness of a national or territorial kind. However, this group specificity can determine the definition of a "people" only if it has a decisive character from the point of view of the individual belonging.

Benedict Anderson[2] provides another definition of the "nation". For him, a nation is "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"[3]. The reasoning for these attributes is the following: 1. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each life the image of their communion. This characteristic identified by Anderson is also a comment on Gellner's ferocious definition of a nationalism, who considers that "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist"[4]; 2. It is *limited* because even the largest of them has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lay other nations. 3. It is *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. 4. It is a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship[5].

Another important concept, which can offer us rational guidance when, as individuals or citizens, we have to respond practically to some national questions, is "nationality". There are several questions regarding nationality that we might have to confront with: 1. Questions regarding boundaries: "Does every nationality have a right to its own state?". May one state have a justified claim to incorporate a territory that presently forms a part of a neighbouring state on the grounds that the population in that territory shares the first state's nationality?; 2. Questions about national sovereignty: "Does national self-determination imply that each state should be sovereign?"; 3. Questions of what nationality, and, based on this, ethnic minority groups, imply for the national policy of the state. "How far is it justifiable to impose limitations on individual freedom in the name of national identity?" or "How far may ethnic minorities be made to conform to the values and ways of life of the national majority?"; 4. Questions about the ethical weight that we, as individuals, should give to the demands of nationality, about the weight, on one side, of the nation as the supreme object of our loyalty and, on the other side, of global common humanity.

In order to understand nationality from within, one must identify several features of "nationality". According to David Miller[6], for instance: 1. National communities are constituted by *belief*: nations exist when their members recognise one another as compatriots, and believe that they share characteristics of the relevant

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[1] Pierre KENDE, "Self-determination in Eastern Europe Yesterday and Today", *Regio*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1993, pp. 39-52.

[2] Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, cit., 1990.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 15.

[4] Ernest GELLNER, *Thought and Change*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1964, p. 169.

[5] Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, cit., pp. 15-16.

[6] David MILLER, *On Nationality*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, 1995, p. 22.

kind; 2. Nationality is an identity that embodies *historical continuity*. The historic national community is a community obligation; 3. Nationality is an *active identity* – nations are communities that do things together, take decisions, achieve results; 4. National identity requires that the people who share it should share a set of characteristics that can be referred to, as a *common public culture* (understood as a set of understandings including political principles, such as belief in democracy or the rule of the law, social norms, and cultural ideas)[1].

The modern definition of the "nation" conveys the idea of a circumscribed body of people bound together by common customs and capable of being represented by political institutions (a prince or a Parliament).

The question that arises from these definitions is: "Are national identities defensible parts of personal identity?". What hold nations and ethnic groups together are beliefs transmitted through cultural artefacts such as books, newspapers, films, songs, electronic media (or, as Benedict Anderson defines it, nations are "imagined community"). Their central elements are more often, language and common history[2]. These are the prerequisites on which ethnic parties base their discourse when they act as "political entrepreneurs" of ethnicity.

Paraphrasing Miller[3], one can state that, in the same time, national histories contain elements of *myth* in so far as they interpret events in a particular way, and also in so far as they amplify the significance of some evens and diminish the significance of others[4]. Miller's answer to the question "Are national identities fictious?" is a negative one, since in national communities people are tightly bound, though they have limited choices (appeal to the historic identity, to the sacrifices made in the past for the sake of the community)[5].

Nationality is a powerful source of personal identity and, in the same time, it is strongly amorphous when we come to ask about the rights and obligations that flow from it. This vacuum might be filled by the *public culture*, a product of political debate disseminated by the media[6]. Most of the time, the obligations of a nation are an artefact of the public culture of that nation. Particular ethical obligations could legitimately be derived from membership in a national community (e.g.: obligations of the state to provide policies that would serve to meet the needs of fellow-nationals – such as medical needs, educational needs). Also, public culture and the obligations of nationality that derive from it can be reshaped over time.

When national boundaries coincide with state boundaries, people will have rights and obligations of citizenship as well as rights and obligations of nationality (as citizens they have rights to personal protection, welfare rights and duties to respect the law, to pay taxes and to up-hold the co-operative scheme).

For good sociological reasons, nationalism is a phenomenon that we must simply accept as a fact of life. Moreover, nationalism is not just an attribute of the majority. Minorities are handling this issue with as much effect and interest as the majority. Nationalism is a political doctrine or a world view according to which

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[1] *Ibidem*, p. 33.
[2] Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, cit.
[3] David MILLER, *On Nationality*, cit., p. 35.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 38.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 42.
[6] Jürgen HABERMAS, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1991, p. 185.

the state and the nation are synonymous and inter-changeable. A nationalist political approach means that the borders of the nation congruent with the borders of the state[1]. What is common to all kinds of nationalisms is the claim that national identity holds precedence over any other quality such as religion, class and even humanity on general.

> "Ethno-nationalism, on the other hand, makes ethnicity the 'stuff' of which the national identity is made of. For ethno-nationalists, the natural history of the ethnic group is the natural history of the nation"[2].

According to Isaiah Berlin, nationalism is a belief in the unique mission of a nation, as being intrinsically superior to the goals and attributes of whatever is outside it; for nationalists, a universal human law or authority is neither possible nor desirable. That is why war, between nations and individuals, must be the only solution[3]. *"Nationalism"* is a doctrine that perceives nations as organic wholes, claiming the idea that there are no ethical limits to what nations may do in pursuit of their aims, having the right and justification to use force to promote national interests at the expense of other peoples.

For some authors (Gellner, Brubaker, Walzer)[4], a distinction, although debatable, between western and eastern nationalism should be made: the basic distinction made in these theories is that "western" nationalism is compatible with the liberal state, while "eastern" nationalism leads more or less inevitably to authoritarianism and cultural repression. We agree with David Miller[5] that there is no good, or even better, western nationalism, or "moderate" nationalism. That is why he prefers the term "Nationality", a term that concerns three interconnected propositions: 1. National identity; 2. Nations as ethical communities; 3. People who form a national community in a particularly territory have the right to claim political self-determination. We also have to keep in mind the fact that there are great variations about national questions both *between societies* and *between individuals* (even among of a similar social background).

Nationalism did not hibernate during Cold war either. In Eastern and Central Europe, communist regimes used nationalism to support their declining popularity. Nationalism returned under different guises (for instance, employed by Ceaușescu's regime in Romania to give itself some semblance of historical legitimacy). During this period, the Habsburg "Megalomanian" Empire has been replaced with the Soviet Union, perceived as an aggressor nation, using communism as an alien ideology. As in earlier times, nationalism was drafted in service against the empire. Therefore, the Cold War was not a discontinuity in the history of the Eastern and Central European nationalism. Rather, it channelled nationalism into

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[1] Michael HECHTER, "Contained Nationalism", *European Sociological Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 323-325.

[2] Sonia ALONSO, *Enduring Ethnicity: the Political Survival of the Incumbent Ethnic Parties in Western Democracies*, Estudio/Working Paper 2005/221, December 2005 Research unit on "Democracy: Structures, Performance, Challenges" at the Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin, p. 4.

[3] Isaiah BERLIN, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, pp. 176-177.

[4] Ernest GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, cit.; Rogers BRUBAKER, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 1996; Michael WALZER, *On Toleration*, Yale University Press, 1997.

[5] David MILLER, *On Nationality*, cit.

different forms and expressions. In the post-Cold war era, nationalism has become more explicit in its manifestations. It has even articulated previously forbidden demands – for state power, cultural autonomy, or territorial control.

In Eastern and Central Europe today the idea of "territotricentrism" or of a "mono-ethnic space" has once again gathered precedence over the political discourse i.e. the territorial controversies between Hungary and Romania and Slovakia, between the Baltic countries and Russia, between Romania and Bulgaria, between Bulgaria and Turkey, between Greece and Albania, between the countries of former Yugoslavia.

Conclusion

Returning to the Weberian argument, that ethnic groups lay at the very core of nations, we can conclude by saying that nevertheless, there is a difference between the ethnic discourses of the 19th century and the ones of the 20th century. While the discourses of the last century were aiming the formation of national states, and were characterised by an aggregate nature, the ethnic discourses of our century in Eastern and Central Europe are of a more dissociative and differentialist nature. We have to remember the separatist tendencies of the countries such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova. The new nationalism may appear on the outside to be a throwback to the past. But while memory and history are certainly important elements, it bears entirely new contemporary attributes. First of all, it is territorial and non-territorial, transnational as well as national. In this case, an important role is played by the Diaspora, either the Diaspora consisting of minorities living in the "near abroad" (e.g. Serbs and Croatians in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Hungarian minority in Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Vojvodina, Romanians in Ukraine, Turks in Bulgaria), or the Diaspora living far away, often in new melting pots nations. The conception of the state is granting the name to the minorities – the diaspora that does have a kin-state across the border is a "national minority", whereas the one with no such privilege is just an "ethnic minority". Secondly, the new nationalism is much more particularistic and fragmenting than the earlier nationalism. It is about labels much more than substance. Finally, the new nationalism has its own evolving organisational forms – it makes use of technology, especially electronic media, to disseminate the message. It is brutal and authoritarian, although it does not necessarily depend on vertical hierarchies (as in the Gellnerian industrial society) of command since control can be exercised through communicative networks and the manipulation of images.

Ethnicity is still an important ingredient of politics and also of individual and collective identities and it does represent an information shortcut to political choices. Bizarre combination of rational and less rational elements, ethnicity remains an important ingredient of cultural, social and political phenomena.